

Reviewing the May 2004 Exit Poll*

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The closest presidential contest since 1946

In reviewing the May 2004 ABS-CBN/SWS Exit Poll, one should bear in mind that the 2004 presidential contest has been the closest since 1946, in terms of the percentage-difference between the winner and the runner-up in the official count of the votes.

Since the Philippine population has grown so rapidly over time, it is the percentages of votes, and not the absolute number of votes, which should be compared, in order to put elections at different historical points on the same footing.

(Curiously, the Commission on Elections has 43,536,028 registered voters in its list for 2004, versus 37,778,579 in its list for 2002 (for the barangay elections), or an increase of 15.2% over only two years. Geographical weighting of election survey research must be anchored on the Comelec voters' list. Yet, if everyone in the list is alive, it would imply that over half of all Filipinos are of voting age, a proportion which some demographers may dispute.)

Before 1992, all presidential elections were decided by at least 6 points.¹ The official outcome of the 1946 election was Roxas 54%, Osmeña Sr. 46%, or a margin of 8 points. In 1949, Quirino won over Laurel Sr. by 51% to 37%, or by 14 points. In 1953, Magsaysay defeated Quirino by 69% to 31%, or by 38 points, the record-largest victory to this day.

1957: Garcia over Yulo by 42% to 28%, or 14 points. 1961: Macapagal over Garcia by 55%-45%, or 10 points. 1965: Marcos over Macapagal by 52%-43%, or 9 points. 1969: Marcos over Osmeña Jr. by 62%-38%, or 24 points (the only previous election of a sitting president for another term). The score of the farcical 1981 election is immaterial; its only historical value is a reminder that the next election was originally scheduled for 1987.

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¹ Election scores are cited in "Opinion Polling in the Philippines: An Encyclopedia Article," by Linda Luz Guerrero and Mahar Mangahas, SWS March 2003; forthcoming in the *International Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*.

In the February 1986 snap election, there were two scores: the official score of the Batasang Pambansa had Marcos by 8 points over Cory Aquino, 54%-46%, and the Namfrel score had Aquino by 6 points over Marcos, 53%-47%.

1992 was very close, with Ramos at 23.6% and Defensor-Santiago at 19.7%, or a difference of 3.9 points. In 1998, Estrada won easily over de Venecia by 39.9%-15.9%, or 24 points.

For 2004, the official canvass of 12,905,808 votes for Arroyo and 11,782,232 for Poe amounts to a score of 40.0%-36.5%, or a margin of only 3.5 points, breaking the previous record for the closest election set in 1992.

Official canvass vs exit poll

The final count of the National Board of Canvassers on June 20, 2004 showed GMA with 12.9 million votes, or 40.0% of the total votes cast for President, FPJ with 11.8 million (36.5%), Lacson with 3.5 million (10.9%), Roco with 2.1 million (6.5%), and Villanueva with 2.0 million (6.2%).

On the other hand, the final percentages in the SWS Day-of-Election Survey were: GMA 45%, Poe 34%, Lacson 10%, Roco 6%, and Villanueva 5%. These exclude blanks or invalid answers, and are posted in the SWS website, with a recommended error margin of plus/minus 2%, given the poll's national sample size of 4,445 declared votes for president.

The exit poll's ranking of candidates matches the official canvass. It understates the canvass by 2 points for FPJ and by 1 point each for Lacson, Roco, and Villanueva, all within the error margin. The counterpart of the understatements, however, is an overstatement by $2 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 5$ points for GMA, resulting in an overstatement of her margin over FPJ by 7 points.

Thus whereas the exit poll, by the afternoon of May 11, suggested a substantial margin of 11 points, the official canvass eventually ended, on June 20, with a margin of only 3.5 points, the narrowest since 1946; this has been one dissatisfaction with the exit poll.

Mismatch in three regions

Region-wise, the leader of the exit poll matched that of the official canvass in 13 out of 16 regions, namely six of the seven regions of Luzon, the exception being Metro Manila, all the three regions of the Visayas, and four of the six regions of Mindanao, the two exceptions being Southern Mindanao and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao.

In Metro Manila (sample size 489, recommended error margin 5%), the exit poll had GMA ahead of FPJ by 34-25, whereas the official canvass had FPJ ahead of GMA by 37-26.

In Southern Mindanao (sample size 238, error margin 7%), it had GMA ahead of FPJ by 50-39, while the official canvass had FPJ over GMA by 42-36.

In ARMM (sample size 187, error margin 7.5%), it had FPJ over GMA by 46-41, while the official canvass had GMA over FPJ by 62-31. However, for ARMM it should also be pointed out that the Namfrel quick count had FPJ at 53% over GMA at 37%.²

The VP, senatorial, and party list races

The exit poll's identification of winners matched the official canvass in the case of the vice-president, 11 senators, and 13 of the 16 winning party-list groups.

For VP, the exit poll (sample size 2,255, recommended error margin 2%) score was de Castro 53%, Legarda 44%, Aquino 4%, and Pajo 0.3%; the official canvass had de Castro 49.8%, Legarda 46.9%, Aquino 3.2%, and Pajo 0.1%. Thus the official margin turned out as only 2.9% whereas the exit poll had pointed to a substantial 9%.

Eleven of the twelve proclaimed as winning senators were in the exit poll's top twelve. The poll correctly ranked Roxas, Revilla and Pimentel as the top three winners. The exceptional winner was Lim, whose 24% tied for 14th place, or close enough to the cut-off score of 27% for 12th place, according to the exit poll report, for a statistically-possible win. Barbers, who was ultimately excluded from the official winning group, had obtained 28% for 10th place in the exit poll.

In the party-list race, the poll correctly ranked Bayan Muna, Apec, Akbayan, Buhay, and Anakpawis as the top five winners. Its 2.0% cut-off identified eight other winners, but missed Coop-Natcco (1.8% in the exit poll, or close enough), Amin (1.0%), and Alif (0.8%). Those over 2.0% but who did not make it were Aba-Ako (2.8% in the poll but 1.98% officially), Elderly (2.1% in the poll, 1.86% officially) and Abaypamilya (2.1% in the poll, 1.05% officially).

² Namfrel had one other region with its quick count leader different from the official canvass leader, namely Central Mindanao which it scored as FPJ 44%, GMA 24% compared to the official score of GMA 39%, FPJ 38%. The Namfrel leader matched the official canvass leader in 14 out of 16 regions.

The exit poll's value goes beyond quick counting

The fact that official vote-counting in the Philippines is so slow has led to the public's great focus on precision in predicting the election outcome, including the margins of victory and not only the identification of winning candidates.

However, early prediction of the election outcome is not the only justification for exit polling, or else there would be no further need for them in countries with modern counting systems.

The special value-added of exit polling, not provided by any other vote-counting mechanism, is in understanding the characteristics of the vote based on other information in the exit poll questionnaire.

Religion: The exit poll estimates the Iglesia ni Cristo voting-strength as 3% of the electorate. Of the INC voters, 74% voted for GMA, 10% for FPJ, 1% for Lacson, and 15% did not fill out their exit-poll ballots.

Charismatic groups: Among El Shaddai voters (1.3% of sampled voters), the exit poll found 53% voting for FPJ, 23% for GMA, and 16% for Lacson. Among those in Couples for Christ (4% of sampled voters), 54% were for GMA and 22% for FPJ. Among the Jesus is Lord (0.7% of sampled voters), 44% were for Villanueva, 24% for GMA and 23% for FPJ.

Age: The older the voter, the greater the tendency to vote for GMA (33% among 18-24 year-olds, versus 45% among 55+), but the less the tendency to vote for FPJ (38% among 18-24s, versus 28% among 55+) or for Lacson (11% among 18-24s, versus 7% among 55+).

Class/schooling: The higher the social class as well as schooling attainment, the greater the strength of the vote for Lacson, Roco, and Villanueva, and the less the strength of the vote for FPJ. The GMA-vote is U-shaped, less among the Class D and the middle-level schooled, and more among the Class A. Class E, non-elementary graduates, and college-graduates.

Among other interesting data included in the exit poll interview are: the timing of the voter's decision on whom to vote for President, the voter's usage of sample ballots, difficulties if any met at the polling precinct, etc. All such materials are important for analyzing Filipino voters' behavior, and are included in the national exit poll data sets archived for public research by SWS since 1995.

Independent reviewing of the exit poll

Even though the bulk of the 2004 exit poll results are compatible with the official canvass, the exit poll producers SWS and TNS-Trends (the fieldwork and data-processing

contractor), jointly with the exit poll sponsor ABS-CBN, recognize that there are deviations of the exit poll from the official outcome significant enough to warrant an independent review, for public information.

Thus a special exit poll review committee has been formed, consisting of four experts from academe and three experts from the Marketing and Opinion Research Society of the Philippines. The committee has elected Dr. Mercedes Concepcion, a distinguished demographer, as its chairperson, and will publicly identify its other members in due course.

Key persons from SWS, TNS-Trends, and ABS-CBN are serving as resource persons, not as members, of the review committee, and will provide full transparency of the exit poll, to assure the public that the poll was not manipulated for partisan purposes. Namfrel is serving as a fourth resource institution, to provide additional information the committee may need.

The review committee is asked to consider the exit poll's sampling, interviewing, data processing, and public reporting, as components for evaluation. It is free to make decisions regarding its procedures and criteria, work program, and the content of its public reports.

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